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## 5 Questions 4 Mark Menlove, Winter Wildlands Alliance

Publish date: Jan 4, 2011

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Land use is a touchy subject for snow and off-road dealers, often spurring an us-against-them mentality for most parties involved in the heated debate. But **Mark Menlove**, executive director of the Winter Wildlands Alliance, argues that digging deeper into the debate will reveal that us-against-them isn't the case. "Certainly, a part of our mission is to work for balance between opportunities for nonmotorized and motorized winter activities," Menlove says of the WWA. "But to say we're trying to eliminate snowmobiles is simply not true." Below is the full transcript of our conversation with Menlove regarding the WWA and its work.

**Dealernews:** What is the Winter Wildlands Alliance about?

**Mark Menlove:** The Winter Wildlands Alliance is a national nonprofit organization with a mission of promoting and preserving winter wildlands and a quality human-powered snowsports experience on public lands. Formed in February, 2000, we work on behalf of snowshoers, skiers, snowboarders, winter hikers, and other outdoor adventurers by addressing local, regional, and national issues that impact winter ecology and winter recreation. Our primary objective is to use education and collaboration to work toward responsible stewardship of winter landscapes while ensuring quality opportunities for a diverse range of winter recreation.

**DN:** What are some of the common misconceptions about your organization's view of snowmobiles?

**M.M.:** That's a great question and I appreciate the opportunity to address this issue directly. I have to say the most common misconception is the one most aggressively promoted by the snowmobile lobby, and that's the notion that Winter Wildlands Alliance is "pursuing the elimination of snowmobiles everywhere," as I recently read in an alert from the American Council of Snowmobile Associations. The thing is, I don't think the folks promoting that message actually believe their own rhetoric, but they're operating on the belief that it's easier to rally support for your own cause if you have a boogey man to fight against. Evidently Winter Wildlands Alliance is the most convenient target to paint as their boogey man. In the end, I think that approach will backfire. I guess time will tell.

Our organization exists to promote human-powered winter activities like backcountry and cross-country skiing, snowshoeing and winter hiking and to protect the winter landscapes where these activities take place. Certainly a part of our mission is to work for balance between opportunities for non-motorized and motorized winter activities, but to say we're trying to eliminate snowmobiles is simply not true.

The fact is, many of our members ride snowmobiles. I have hundreds of hours on a sled. My family had snowmobiles when I was growing up and immediately before coming on board with Winter Wildlands Alliance, my wife and children and I spent three years living in a cabin at 9,200 feet in the Wasatch Mountains, where for six months of the year, we commuted by snowmobile. I consider anyone who enjoys the winter outdoors a kindred spirit — and I'm speaking both personally and on behalf of Winter Wildlands Alliance here. The way I see it, snowmobilers and skiers have plenty of common ground and we ought to be able to use that common ground to find solutions to winter recreation issues.



**DN:** Why is snowmobile regulation important?

**M.M.:** Snowmobile regulation is important because it's the only way to maintain any kind of balance in the winter backcountry and at the same time protect sensitive wildlife habitat and winter ecosystems. Without regulation you end up with a free-for-all where those with the biggest, most powerful toys get their run of the place and everyone else gets pushed aside.

Now I understand that a free-for-all zone is exactly what some people want and I have no problem with the Forest Service designating areas on each forest where snowmobilers can test themselves and their machines without restrictions, but those of us who want to test our backcountry skills under our own power or who simply want to get away from the noise and stress of our machine-dominated world should also have designated areas where we can find peace and quiet in the backcountry. Because

skiers and snowshoers are much more limited in how far we can travel by foot, it's important that non-motorized areas be easily accessible from trailheads. And protection of wintering wildlife or critical winter habitat should prevail over all recreation use, whether motorized or non-motorized. The bottom line is we have more than enough winter backcountry to accommodate both motorized and non-motorized users and a whole range of uses in between but that won't happen without well-thought-out management plans for each forest.

**DN:** Tell us more about this snowmobile loophole you are petitioning.

**M.M.:** The loophole is a result of the 2005 Travel Management Rule, also known as the ORV Rule, which provides the framework used to designate which trails, roads and areas on each National Forest unit are open to motorized use and where motors are prohibited. Up until the 2005 Rule took effect, all off-road vehicles, including snowmobiles, were managed under a uniform set of standards on national forest lands. However, the 2005 Rule repealed the previous ORV regulations and at the same time exempted over-snow vehicles from the new Rule without establishing replacement regulations for managing snowmobiles.

The 2005 Rule does include a clause stating that "if the responsible official proposes restrictions or prohibitions on use by over-snow vehicles" then all of the procedural elements of the Rule apply. In our view, that clause creates a clear bias toward unregulated snowmobile use. In other words, a forest supervisor or district ranger can decide without any public input to simply ignore snowmobile management but if they propose any kind of restriction on

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snowmobiles then the full weight of the Travel Management Process comes to bear. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to guess that the vast majority of those forest supervisors and district rangers, most of whom are overworked and understaffed, are choosing to ignore snowmobile management.

The petition from Winter Wildlands Alliance and our supporting partners simply asks the Forest Service to manage snowmobiles on a consistent basis and to do so under the same guidelines used for all other classes of ORVs. And that brings up another common misconception among snowmobilers – that applying the Travel Management process to snowmobiles will somehow limit snowmobiles to designated trails and will eliminate off trail riding. Again, simply not true. The 2005 Rule includes a tool for allowing off-trail snowmobile use by directing each national forest unit to designate "roads, trails and areas" for motor vehicle use. The Rule defines "area" as a "discrete, specifically delineated space that is smaller, and in most cases much smaller, than a Ranger District." Most Ranger Districts encompass hundreds of thousands of acres so to say that the designated areas for snowmobile use will be smaller than a Ranger District leaves a huge amount of leeway to accommodate off-trail riding. Winter Wildlands Alliance has asserted all along that we fully expect the Forest Service to apply a more liberal use of the area concept for winter use than for summer use.

Our primary goal in petitioning the Forest Service to amend the 2005 Travel Management Rule is to create a public, collaborative, and fair process to determine where winter motorized use is appropriate and where it is not. We see this as an opportunity to bring skiers, snowmobilers and other stakeholders to the same table to figure out solutions that work for all of us.

**DN:** What will it mean for snowmobile dealers if the loophole removed? Do you anticipate any change at all?

**M.M.:** I don't see any change for snowmobile dealers other than an opportunity to serve as a community resource for their customers and to engage in the planning processes for their local forest.

**DN:** Many dealers perceive snowmobile regulation as bad for their businesses. Do you agree or disagree, and why/why not?

**M.M.:** It seems to me that saying regulation is bad for the snowmobile business is like saying traffic laws are bad for the auto business. I can't imagine car dealers would sell more cars if we did away with our system of letting both drivers and non-drivers know the parameters under which cars can be operated safely and responsibly. That's not to say I don't recognize how tough it must be right now for dealers. There are a lot of factors, not the least of which is a tight economy, that are negatively impacting dealers and I have real empathy for those dealers, just like I have empathy for the shops trying to sell skis and snowshoes. The last thing I would want is to hinder any aspect of the recreation economy. I believe the kind of responsible management we're proposing will not harm snowmobile business.

Furthermore, I think the snowmobile industry could gain a great deal of traction by endorsing this effort toward responsible management. That would certainly show the general public and the land management agencies that the snowmobile industry is sincere in their desire to be good stewards of the public lands set aside for snowmobiling.

**DN:** How can a dealer protect his own interest in remaining profitable, yet still address some regulation and environmental issues?

**M.M.:** It would be presumptuous of me to tell snowmobile dealers, who obviously know a whole lot more than I ever could about their own businesses and their customers, how to be more profitable but I don't believe responsible regulation and dealer profitability are linked. In my experience there are a lot of other retail segments who could learn a great deal from snowmobile dealers about creating customer loyalty. When I was living on the mountain and riding a snowmobile almost daily I definitely had a strong sense of loyalty toward my chosen dealership, Weller Recreation in Kamas, Utah. They did a phenomenal job of creating a sense of community and camaraderie. I always enjoyed hanging out at the counter – they knew me and my machines and I wouldn't have considered going anywhere else for parts or supplies. That kind of loyalty seems common among snowmobile dealers and their customers. I can't help but think customers will stick with dealers who foster that sense of community and that even if those customers have limited buying power right now because of the tough economy they're going to remain loyal and will still be there when the economy turns around.

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